

*With Imprisoned Veterans, Focuses on Issues Facing Former Servicemembers that Have Received Far Too Little Attention*

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MEDIA, PA – Noting a 2004 Department of Justice study showing that 140,000 Veterans were incarcerated in state and federal prison and that more than three out of five suffered from substance dependence or abuse, Congressman Joe Sestak (PA-07) spoke with Veterans at the Pennsylvania State Correctional Institution at Graterford on Veterans Day to spotlight challenges in caring for returning servicemembers that have received inadequate resources. The Congressman opened a ceremony at the Graterford facility where he was joined by: more than 100 Veterans, many of them inmates who were diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) after incarceration; Reverend Dwight Edwards, Vietnam Veteran & author; Dr. Susan Sadiel, Director of Widener's Veterans Law Clinic; and Bill DiMascio, Executive Director, of the PA Prison Society.

In working with Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric Shinseki, Congressman Sestak has advocated for a seamless transition from active duty to the VA medical system and access to medical treatment appropriate to a Veteran's condition. Then, should they find themselves incarcerated, he wants to be certain that Veterans' care will continue throughout their time in prison.

“I will never condone or excuse criminal behavior of any kind,” said Congressman Sestak. “But as someone who witnessed the injustice done to so many of our Vietnam Veterans, I am determined to see that our Veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan and their families are afforded the continuity of care they need from diagnosis until they are whole again.

“It is critical to understand the relationship between deferred or sub-standard diagnoses, inconsistent medical care, incarceration and homelessness. Our Veterans go into harm’s way to defend our justice system and for too long they and their families have been disappointed by that system, combined with outdated Veterans Administration policies which restrict their care should they become incarcerated. In order to prevent homelessness we must better understand and address all of the factors that contribute to it. We must do more to ensure that those who specialize in treating service-related illnesses have the opportunity and access necessary to treat Veterans who suffer from PTSD, TBI, MST and other emotional injuries before they are incarcerated. We had too many Vietnam-era Vets incarcerated who then became unemployable and then found themselves on the streets where additional problems take hold and a downward spiral becomes extremely hard to interrupt.”

Estimates have shown that at least ten percent of the about 2.2 million incarcerated Americans are Veterans. Forty-six percent of Veterans in federal prison and 15 percent of Veterans in state prison were there for drug violations. Sixty-one percent of incarcerated Veterans met the DSM-IV criteria for substance dependence or abuse. Distressingly, more than half of Veterans in federal or state prisons served during wartime.

“Veterans are fighters by nature -- not victims,” said Congressman Sestak. “More than anything else they joined the military out of a sense of service, patriotism and to build themselves and their families a better life. They want an opportunity to succeed not hand-outs. If we can better

diagnose and treat the conditions that contribute to incarceration, we can reduce homelessness and we can do an enormous service to Veterans, their families and our communities.”

Congressman Sestak has engaged VA officials about ways to address appropriate care for incarcerated Veterans and the importance of this issue in efforts to reduce Veteran homelessness as part of a broader initiative to see that our government honors its obligations to Veterans, their families and the taxpayers in a transparent, accountable and efficient way. The Congressman has also introduced legislation to help combat homelessness among Veterans by increasing the amount of assistance that Veterans housing vouchers can provide. Furthermore, he helped pass the Homes for Heroes Act of 2009, requiring the Department of Housing and Urban Development to provide at least 20,000 rental vouchers each year to homeless Veterans and create a new supportive housing program; and helped pass the Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program Reauthorization Act of 2009 to provide an additional \$10 million for services dedicated to homeless women and homeless Veterans with children.

The record funding Congress has appropriated to the VA in recent years must be used to address our most challenging problems. In two terms in Congress his staff has worked more than five thousand cases for Veterans as well as active duty, Guard and Reserve personnel and their families. Based on that work and his experience in uniform for more than three decades, the Congressman is a strong proponent of a seamless transition from the military to the VA, wider use of special Veterans Courts that can best take into account the challenges facing so many of our returning service members, and closer collaboration between the VA and correctional facilities to see that if a Veteran is incarcerated their care is consistent with their sacrifice.

Last Veterans Day, Congressman Sestak visited the State Correctional Institute in Chester, where he spoke with inmates about how they ended up in prison as part of his effort to reduce incarceration and address homelessness among Veterans. At that time, he also wrote to the

Secretary Shinseki about ways our legal and medical systems can better collaborate to support those Veterans who may find themselves incarcerated as a result of service-related injuries and impairments.

*Born and raised in Delaware County, former 3-star Admiral Joe Sestak served in the Navy for 31 years and now serves as the Representative from the 7th District of Pennsylvania. He led a series of operational commands at sea, including Commander of an aircraft carrier battle group of 30 U.S. and allied ships with over 15,000 sailors and 100 aircraft that conducted operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. After 9/11, the Congressman was the first Director of Deep Blue, the Navy's anti-terrorism unit that established strategic and operations policies for the Global War on Terrorism. He served as President Clintons Director for Defense Policy at the National Security Council in the White House, and holds a Ph.D. in Political Economy and Government from Harvard University. According to the office of the House Historian, Congressman Sestak is the highest-ranking former military officer ever elected to the U.S. Congress.*

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